

demonstrated its ability to manage social/political turmoil and, as Baudrillard suggests "every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions" (1983: p. 31). This end of cycle termination and "scattering" is reflected explicitly in the 1993 AVCC Media Release which describes the level of unmet demand in 1992 as "unprecedented" but emphasises the government's "initiatives in providing wider community access to higher education". The end result, we are told, "is very gratifying" and a "turn-around in the trend" for increases in unmet demand.

Further 'evidence' of this turn-around is provided by the 1994 data (and the accompanying AVCC comments). The publicising of the fact that unmet demand has 'slumped' by 4.4% is accompanied by an acknowledgment that the declining number of applicants--a decline linked to "a successful campaign to encourage students into the TAFE system, prospective students being put off applying...and growing optimism about the economy" (*Campus Review*, July 14-20: 3)--is part of an on-going downward trend linked to reduced Year 12 populations which will continue until 1996. It is important to be aware, however, that this decline will not be evident in applications for entry to all university courses. The teaching profession provides a good example. While Faculties of Education have been downsized it is quite clear that there will be a sharp increase in demand for teachers from now until 2001 (Preston, 1994: pp. 1-18).

What must be continually emphasised is that the discourse which informs this move from crisis to containment takes account of (and responds to) only a very select number of factors. By establishing the discourse of open learning and promoting the opportunity it gives to designated 'disadvantaged groups', governments, universities and the media are complicit in, firstly, naturalising particular distinctions between groups of people and modes of access and, secondly, eliding any ideological dimension to these oppositions. In other words, by repeatedly emphasising physical barriers and by convincingly positing physical solutions, the government enjoys the rewards of solving a crisis without having to interrogate the political and social practices which establish, maintain and naturalise the oppositions outlined above. As a result, the discourse of unmet demand and the rhetoric of open learning displace all considerations of the ideological barriers which limit university access in the first place.

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we take higher education to refer specifically to university education. Tertiary education refers to all education beyond secondary, including postcompulsory, TAFE and university education.
- <sup>2</sup> These efforts were so successful that the AEC's national goal of achieving 65% retention to Year 12 by 1992 was in fact achieved by 1990. (Williams et al, 1993b: pp. 5). The *Participation and Equity Program* (1983) and *Priority One: Young Australia* (1986) are just two of the initiatives which contributed to this 'success' (Williams et al, 1993b: pp. 12).
- <sup>3</sup> In this use of the term 'naturalised' we are referring to the process by which any particular practice, ideology or definition is produced as being 'natural', that is, as self-evident, right or unproblematic. 'Naturalisation' is connected to the repetition of one particular 'truth'; the exclusion of alternative 'truths' from dominant discourses; and the association of the 'natural' truth with other previously valorised concepts.

# New pathways?: Postcompulsory schooling, TAFE and mass higher education

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## Abstract

The new postcompulsory education and training policies (expressed in the Finn, Carmichael and Mayer reports), where goals of microeconomic reform are linked to equity issues, represent an ambiguous policy mix and offer contradictory possibilities for young people. The article reviews the context of these developments and reports on preliminary research investigating how these policies are being taken up in specific institutional settings, with a particular focus on the extent to which the potential for a more equitable provision of education and training might be realised. The broader implications of the findings for progressive reform of the postcompulsory education and training system will be discussed, together with the implications for mass higher education.

## A new policy agenda

By 2010, education and training would be characterised by multiple pathways for students. These would include simultaneous school and university study and multi-skilled teaching staff moving between industry and education. The interaction of vocational education and job-based training would lead to a dramatic change in the structure of education... (Gregor Ramsay, Managing Director, NSW TAFE, reported in the *The Australian* 21 October 1992).

The release in 1991 and 1992 of the Finn, Carmichael and Mayer Reports signalled a new policy target: postcompulsory education and training, involving a restructuring of TAFE and an attempt to develop better articulated pathways between schooling, higher education and work. Underpinned by a mix of utilitarian and utopian assumptions, the reports combine an explicitly instrumental "human capital" approach to education and labour market reform aimed at improving Australia's skills base with a concern to provide a broader range of options for a wider group of young people than currently exists. Here, we wish to briefly review the context for these developments and, based on some preliminary research, speculate on the extent to which and under what circumstances the potential for a more equitable provision of education and training might be realised. These new policies form part of a broader "training reform agenda" with industrial as well as educational implications. Our focus here however is on the educational aspects, with a particular interest in the implications for equity provision.

The Finn-Carmichael-Mayer triad represent what could be called an Australian version of the "new vocationalism": a concern with "converging" general and vocational education, so that general education is seen as relevant to work and vocational education is seen as broader than specific work-based skills; with extending postcompulsory education to include virtually all young people through the creation of flexible educational pathways between school, TAFE, higher education and work; and with developing competency-based approaches which recognise what people can do or have done, rather than simply the time spent to gain formal credentials. In this, the reports reflect a somewhat uneasy synthesis of post-fordist "new labour market" rhetoric about the need for multiskilled and adaptive workers (seen for example in *Australia Reconstructed*, ACTU/TDC 1987) and older (fordist) demands for workplace flexibility and closer links between school and work.

These reports need to be seen against the backdrop of problems with existing education and training provisions. For example, although the range of courses offered by the TAFE system has broadened during the eighties, the Australian training system has been dominated by an outdated and narrow training model, where credentials were gained by undertaking formal courses or training on or prior to leaving school, (referred to by Carmichael (1992) as 'front end learning'). This model has lacked the flexibility to cater for the needs of those who may not have followed conventional pathways and has preserved the privileged labour market position of credential holders (Freeland 1992, pp. 80-81). It has also been male dominated, with limited training opportunities for women (Pocock 1988). Similarly, while a number of initiatives have evolved within the schooling system, particularly at the senior levels, to "cater for" a more diverse school population, school curriculum is still seen to be university driven and fractured around the 'academic' and 'vocational' divide and its underlying class basis (Connell et al 1982).

The challenge for the new policies then is to open up pathways through systems which, if not totally closed, have certainly been well "gatekept". The essential "new vocationalist" argument is that the policies, as well as contributing to a better skilled workforce, are likely to lead to more generally equitable outcomes than previously because of their more "inclusive" education and training potential. In the words of one of the chief architects of the new agenda, 'If we get the basics right, equity will follow' (Carmichael 1992). Advocates see virtues in the potential for developing credentialled pathways between industry and schooling comparable with those between schooling and the universities. For example, Richard Sweet of the Dusseldorp Skills Foundation comments on the lack of fit between schooling, with its greatly increased and more diverse population, and post-school vocational options. This is in marked contrast, he suggests, to the bridges between school and higher education, laid down by the rules of higher education which 'shape the curriculum for the preceding two years... and the exchange values of the resulting school credential' (*The Australian* 8 Jan 1992).

The new policies have been developed with the involvement of the Commonwealth and all State governments, business and industry and the ACTU, including the education unions. Generally however, representatives from the education sectors centrally involved with implementation of the policies have been excluded from the national vanguard responsible for framing them. Not surprisingly, then, the policies have generated considerable debate within educational circles, much of which was reported in the pages of the Higher Education Supplement of *The Australian* throughout 1992. These debates provide insights into the scope, complexity and politics of the policy agenda - significant for a consideration of which aspects are likely to be taken up, or rejected. We have reported more fully on these matters elsewhere (Taylor and Henry 1994). For the purposes of this discussion, we will take up one of the significant themes to emerge: the debate around definitions of education and training and, related, the respective roles of TAFE and universities.

While the new policies imply a kind of seamless web of educational and training pathways, opponents, particularly from the universities, tend to conceptualise a clear distinction between intellectual work (education) and applied knowledge (training) with a respective divi-

sion of function between universities and TAFE. This perception surfaces particularly in the debate over the competencies approaches advocated in the new policies, a very complicated matter given the different strands of competencies involved: competency-based training or education; specific vocational competencies as referred to in the Carmichael Report; and the key or 'generic' competencies developed by the Mayer Committee. The latter pertain mostly to schooling where, Mayer insists, they should be seen as existing alongside, not replacing, existing curricula: 'There is a fear that the key competencies will be linked to the proposed Australian vocational certificate and end up being driven by industrial relations issues. I do not believe industrial relations concerns should determine what people learn for work' (*The Australian* 14 October 1992). Little has been said in the reports about competency-based approaches in the universities. For all that, in much of the education debate, the various competency strands are conflated, with trenchant critics such as Professor Penington, Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University referring to what he calls 'the competencies movement' in almost conspiratorial terms: 'It seeks to describe and control all education and training in terms of "work-related competencies" and to bring all within a seamless web of control of the entire Australian workforce through a network of tripartite committees of union, industry and government representatives' (*The Australian* 18 November 1992).

In essence, however, the argument pivots around that perceived distinction between "education" and "training", with many educators being hostile to the "contamination" of educational goals by industry-driven vocationalism, and sceptical of the possibility of developing "generic" competencies independent of a narrow work focus. For example, Frank Hambly, Executive Director of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee stated his belief:

*that most of the higher order intellectual skills which universities impart are not capable of measurement as competencies and that universities must therefore resist their imposition. If they do not, they run the risk of having their courses and curricula distorted to give undue weight to sets of attributes removed from the necessary, if less measurable, intellectual context in which they must be embedded* (*The Australian* 23-24 May 1992).

Similarly, Professor Osborne, Vice Chancellor of La Trobe University, criticised 'the seemingly inexorable thrust for the application of competency-based standards in education' arguing that 'the presumption that all education was work-related embodied an embarrassingly materialistic approach'. His main fear: that a national standardised competency assessment system could be imposed on the universities, with the result that universities would be transformed into 'education factories, governed by the jargon of the marketplace and where students were called customers.... What is essentially under challenge here is whether there is still a place for a university as a focus for learning as opposed to a centre for training or "skilling"' (*The Australian* 23 July 1992).

By contrast, the proponents of the competency approach object to what they see as an artificial division between thinking and doing. For example, Laurie Carmichael sees workers as needing both technological and social skills. He attacks the attitude of:

*mystical academic friends, who believe you can only learn to think in a way bestowed by them in universities. There'll be a convergence of work and learning, and the convergence of the workplace into both a work and learning place will have developed to such a degree that academic witchcraft will finally disappear.* (*The Australian* 2 June 1992)

The universities' opposition to Carmichael's "grand vision", however, highlights the persistence of the academic/vocational divide and the implications of this for realising more inclusive approaches to education and training. How these tensions would be reflected in the early implementation stages of the new policies was the focus of our research on the Australian Vocational Certificate (AVC) pilots in Queensland.

## Equity and the AVC pilots in Queensland

In 1993, we commenced research in Queensland aimed at investigating which aspects of the new policies were being picked up "on the ground". We were interested in examining the broad claim for greater "inclusiveness" as well as more "targetted" notions of equity underlying the concern with questions of "participation, equity and access for disadvantaged groups" in the reports. We looked in some detail at four of the projects funded as pilot studies for the introduction of the Australian Vocational Certificate Training System (referred to as AVC pilots), which in turn involved an examination of the processes surrounding the administration of the pilots. This research is ongoing, but some trends are discernible, particularly in the processes of "policy refraction" from the rhetoric of the Commonwealth documents, to State systems activities, to implementation in the AVC pilots. These trends can only be briefly summarised here.

The Commonwealth rhetoric is reasonably strong. For example, DEET released two documents explicitly addressing equity concerns. *Access and Equity: Explanatory notes for AVC Pilot Proposals* (DEET 1993) contains principles and a checklist for use as a guide in developing access and equity strategies for specific target groups. The *Draft Equity Strategy* (early 1993, undated) lists key features which 'should enhance access to vocational education and training for all young people, including disadvantaged young people'. Among these features were 'an increase in the number of occupations and industries covered by articulated structured training arrangements' and 'the provision of multiple flexible pathways to accommodate the needs and circumstances of most young people' (p. 1). The need to take equity issues into account in the development and implementation of the AVC training system is stressed. Access and equity issues are prominent too in the terms of reference of a more general document, the *AVC Pilots National Evaluation Strategy* (March 1993) which refers to the need to identify 'to what extent groups typically not involved in entry-level training in the past are now participating i.e. whether equity targets have been achieved' (p. 7).

However, processes of marginalisation and the emergence of potential loop-holes were evident from the outset. For example, the *Explanatory Notes* were distributed as *Addenda to the Pilot Project Guidelines* about 5 months after the initial guidelines were issued in 1992, and they include the significant point that 'access and equity criteria should not be applied absolutely to individual projects', but were to be applied across the suite of projects within each state 'in order to identify gaps and best practice'. Further, the *Draft Equity Strategy* was not circulated until most of the projects were under way! The reason for the delay was indicated by a representative from DEET at a one day conference on the AVC pilots in Brisbane in July 1993: 'Some of the business members [of the AVC Working Party] are not happy with the language... The trick is to get the agenda up without offending the key players - it has to be recrafted'. Clearly much will rest on monitoring and evaluation processes, but even in the Evaluation Strategy the urgency of getting the AVC "up and running" has resulted in an emphasis on practical issues: 'The "bottom line" for the evaluation is to identify those things that work, those that do not, and the reasons why' (p. 6).

At the State level, an AVC Trials Steering Committee was established in Queensland in 1992, with a joint Commonwealth-State AVC Task Force being formed to carry out the administrative work of that Committee. While the Steering Committee had wide representation, only as a result of lobbying from the Education Department's Gender Equity Unit were two nominees with expertise in equity and social justice added to the Committee after its formation. One of these nominees resigned early in 1993 and was not replaced until 1994. A further outcome of lobbying was the decision to form a Social Justice sub-committee of the Steering Committee with terms of reference to formulate and distribute material on social justice to those involved with the AVC trials, and to assist in integrating access and equity into all pilots (AVC Trials Steering Committee minutes, February 1993). However, there is no record of any outcomes or meetings of this sub-committee in the Steering Committee minutes. Suggestions on ways

in which access and equity aspects could be developed, prepared by the remaining "social justice" nominee in a paper *AVC Projects and Equity* were not taken up. It was reported that committee members were 'more interested in industrial issues' and felt that data gathering in relation to access and equity issues could be left to DEET. The concern with pragmatic issues was reinforced in the work of the Task Force where, it seems, the real decision-making occurred.

Equity issues were given little attention in the forms designed for submitting proposals for pilot project funding. Only in one question were applicants asked to: 'Describe features of the pilot project designed to facilitate access and equity'. The response to this question in one submission stated that the organisation '... has an Equity Statement and Equitable Recruitment and Selection Policy and Procedures'. Overall then, equity issues have been marginal on the State agenda. Because of the urgency involved in implementing the AVC Training System, there has been an emphasis on the practicalities of implementation at the expense of attention to the long term goals of the policies. What effect has this had on the pilot projects themselves at a local level?

Only one of the pilots examined seemed to be really engaging with the macro reform agenda in the sense that fundamental education arrangements were being challenged. This pilot was attempting to broaden the senior secondary school curriculum in its school in order to open up pathways for a more diverse group of students. In doing this, academic-vocational offerings were conceptualised as existing on a spectrum rather than a divide. By mixing and matching subjects, students were to be given opportunities for gaining qualifications for entering university, TAFE or both. The pilot involved cooperation with several TAFE colleges and a number of local industries. The other three projects were more narrowly conceived and pragmatic in their approach. One trades-based pilot, initiated out of a working class high school feeling the pressure of reluctant school stayers, stated its desire to offer 'a convergent model of general and vocational education and training using accredited TAFE curriculum and on the job training'. What really seemed to be happening, however, was the offering of a more viable alternative to an academic curriculum in which a sprinkling of "general subjects" were added to the vocational mix. Ironically, the pilot was highly selective in its intake, requiring prerequisites of English, Maths, Shop A and Shop B - catering in fact for a vocational - male - elite? The same concern with challenging schooling's traditional academic focus was expressed in an interview with a "key player" from a retailing pilot:

*Perhaps pilots like this will eventually force the Department of Education to look at their curriculum because they are going to have to adapt... [The Department] is finally waking up to the fact that the school success rate cannot just be measured by the number of VHAs and OPs<sup>2</sup>. What they are realising [is important] is how many get jobs.*

Essentially, this pilot offered students the opportunity to gain a certificate in retailing, in cooperation with local enterprises and TAFE. The fourth pilot examined, conducted in conjunction with a large hotel chain, involved trialling an inservice program for teachers to increase awareness of significant elements of the new policies - AVC pathways, Competency Based Training, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), etc. - in order to improve the quality of vocational training in the hospitality industry in schools.

This very sketchy overview gives some insight into which aspects of the "equity agenda" are being picked up or neglected. Serious consideration is being given to "non academic" students, though the motivations for this are varied. Only in one instance did the attempt to provide broader options for a more diverse student body seem to be guided by a conceptual framework that incorporated a revamping of the whole school curriculum and its linkages with workplaces and further education. Generally however, the pilots seemed to adopt variations of "school-industry-TAFE links" approaches, most of which were underway prior to achieving pilot project status. While there are undoubtedly progressive elements here, whether such links constitute "articulated pathways", is not clear. What seems to be happening is the

development of new channels, in hospitality, retailing, engineering or whatever, glossed with the language of competence, catering for the "individual needs" of students who are not academically inclined. And even these channels may be precarious given their selective nature. More explicit notions of equity were virtually absent from the pilots except at the most cursory level. For example, the retail pilot stated that its selection procedures would be 'based on equity principles' - and this turned out to be aimed at getting boys into a female dominated industry! - while the trades-based pilot referred to the need to provide access 'for females, students with disabilities, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and adults'. In fact, no students from these groups appeared to be involved in the pilot - certainly no girls - and indeed in interviews some staff at the school were openly hostile to what one referred to as 'the equity industry'.

So what implications does this all have for the broader workings of the new policies? And what are the implications for mass higher education? In our concluding comments, we return to broader policy issues as well as considering, somewhat speculatively, the implications of our early research.

## Equity, pathways and implications for higher education.

The new policy agenda rests on assumptions about the possibility of welding a new synthesis of general and vocational education out of a system explicitly and historically geared to separating these strands, and of creating a "seamless web" across the various education sectors historically ridden with barriers. And all this through a policy process in which educators have been only marginally involved! Additionally, the agenda confronts the complexities of Australian federalism as well as a myriad of technical difficulties: industrial relations arrangements; modularisation of curriculum and development of competency modes of presentation and assessment; accreditation and articulation arrangements, including mechanisms for recognition of prior learning; and so forth. In relation to these matters and in light of our research we would make the following brief comments.

Policy making in Australia has always had to negotiate the difficult terrain of State-Federal relations. However, Labor's emphasis now on questions of "national interest" in pursuit of its broad macro and micro-economic reform agenda has highlighted the need for a careful articulation of national policy frameworks, system-wide coordination and flexibility for local initiatives. This is particularly pertinent in the case of education, with its complex division of responsibilities between Federal, State and regional arenas. In relation to these new policies, that articulation appears to be in total disarray. For example, take the important question of the relationship between the TAFE and the university sectors. Underlying the pathways ideal is the implication of a significant upgrading for TAFE. However, Dawkins' decision to make the university sector rather than TAFE his initial policy target in 1987/8 was counterproductive in this regard. No doubt expediency played a part here given the Commonwealth's already existing financial hold over the universities in comparison with the States' jurisdiction over schooling and TAFE, but nevertheless one outcome of the creation of the "unified national system" was to consolidate the universities' status and sectional self-interest. By the time the Commonwealth came round to seriously taking up the TAFE option in 1991/2 with a (rejected) 2 billion dollar offer to the States for Commonwealth control of TAFE, "States Rights" issues had seriously intruded (Taylor and Henry 1994) and TAFE's relationship with higher education - handmaiden, equal partner or viable alternative - remains problematic.

Thus with no national strategies for guiding TAFE responses to the new policies, and with TAFE undergoing the turmoil of restructuring at the State level (in Queensland at least), there appears to be a policy vacuum. It is perhaps illustrative that in Queensland the contracts for the AVC pilots were drawn up between DEET and the Education Department rather than TAFE, with the main impetus for taking up the agenda coming from schools rather than TAFE colleges, despite the centrality of TAFE in the initial reports, particularly Finn. In the

absence of a clearly articulated policy framework, two things appear to be occurring: a filling of the vacuum by private providers (indeed explicitly encouraged as part of the government's "competition-led" solution to policy compliance) with all the fragmenting pressures accompanying that process; and a tendency to simply tinker with existing arrangements. We will elaborate in light of our Queensland research, noting that there may well be State differences here.

As noted earlier, initiatives in developing links between schools, TAFE and workplaces were already quite well established in Queensland, some perhaps echoing earlier "transition education" approaches of the mid seventies, with others reflecting more recent developments in senior schooling. Many of these initiatives, while clearly serving to cater for a more diverse student population, have been criticised for reinforcing schooling's academic/vocational divide, while failing to do much more than provide "holding pens" for disaffected youth unable to get jobs. The new policies promise to transcend these problems, though our initial research suggests these claims may be doubtful. For example, we have noted how rather disparate, even competing interests have been "stitched together" in the new policies. The pilot 'case studies' provide some insights into how these interests begin to unravel in the face of implementation pressures, particularly in the absence of administrative coordination or effective monitoring procedures. For instance, given what one interviewee referred to as the 'AVC bucket' mentality, there is the understandably pragmatic tendency to convert existing initiatives in, say, school-industry links, into AVC funded pilots, dressed in the language of pathways and competencies. However, the extent to which these new initiatives challenge older dead-end approaches, often with their gendered, ethnocentric and class underpinnings, is most unclear given the lack of scrutiny over the capacity of the projects to deliver their stated objectives. Students may yet find themselves in uncredentialed or gendered cul-de-sacs rather than structured education and training pathways.

Additionally, some ironic new twists are emerging. For example, the most successful pilot we examined is viewed as a kind of exemplar of what can be achieved. However, it is highly resource-intensive in relation to the industry placement component and for this reason almost impossible to replicate across the system as a whole<sup>3</sup>. What may ultimately emerge then are a few showcase initiatives, successful in themselves but making little impact on a systemic provision of credentialed pathways. Associated with this is a new form of territoriality: the development and jealous preservation of particular links between schools - often the private schools - and enterprises. And yet another consequence are the arrangements some schools are making with private training providers for their "brightest" students. Ironically then, vocational education appears to be becoming a 'positional good' in a postcompulsory education and training market! (Marginson 1993)

How to prevent the new agenda from becoming another channeling device whose benefits are coopted by the already advantaged is, we believe, an important policy issue. The question is: who or what body is to address this? DEET currently holds the monitoring brief for the AVC pilots, but DEET itself appears to be in some disarray - 'gutted to death' in the words of one interviewee. With possibly a DEET and, in some States, a TAFE vacuum, responsibility for postcompulsory education and training policies could be given over to yet another body, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). ANTA was established in 1992 to coordinate training arrangements between the States within a framework of national goals, but an early priorities document (ANTA 1994) suggests that it is unlikely to play a strongly interventionist role vis-a-vis the States. Meanwhile, there have been some loosening of system barriers through credit transfer and cooperative arrangements between schools, TAFE and some universities, though there is still considerable resistance to this from some of the older universities. Such resistance may only exert indirect effects, via the universities' continuing dominance of senior school curricula, given that the new policies mainly target the seventy percent of students who do not go onto university. More pertinent now are the welter of technical difficulties to be resolved. In Queensland at least, the lack of effective State level coordination and planning to deal with

these issues, together with a seeming reluctance to draw on an appropriate range of expertise (for example on equity issues or broader education issues) means that developments tend to be somewhat piecemeal, fragmented and uninformed.

The lack of attention to developing effective monitoring mechanisms perhaps reflects broader pressures impacting on the policy agenda: continuing high levels of unemployment, increased school retention rates and "unmet demand" for higher education. These pressures have the potential to divert attention from the original long-term goals into a concern for short term "quick fixes". This was seen for example in Queensland in pressures to get the agenda "up and running" and to identify "what works" at the expense of more thorough consideration of strategies for ensuring that access and equity issues were taken seriously in the pilots. The Finn and Carmichael Reports aimed at reforming postcompulsory education arrangements and entry level training in Australia as part of a long term strategy for economic recovery. However, continuing public concern about unemployment may see the agenda subverted by recent initiatives contained in the white paper on unemployment, *Working Nation*, which deals more specifically with the problem of the long-term unemployed. How or whether these latest initiatives become integrated into the postcompulsory education and training initiatives remains at this stage an open question.

Finally, there is the rather dismal question of "pathways into what"? Economists now point to the 'shrinking middle' in Australian society, the increasing division between rich and poor and the decline in permanent, full-time jobs (Raskall 1992). In class terms, the new policies can be seen as aimed at the victims of these broader economic and labour market processes, but unable to address the more fundamental problem of full employment. Feminists point to the dangers for women of the politics of skills recognition being revisited in the politics of competencies recognition (Probert 1991). Such critiques take us into the murky theoretical terrain of the limitations of educational reform or, for that matter, state intervention in capitalist and patriarchal societies. Those profound limitations aside, we would simply argue that in an era when educational credentials are becoming virtually mandatory, the policies have a potential to improve education and training options for a wider group of young people than currently exists. Between the potential and the realisation lies a path mined with historical and cultural legacies, vested interests and politics, some of which we have attempted to elucidate here.

## Notes

1. The term derives from British literature where it was used to denote an emphasis on vocational education under the Thatcher Government as a response to youth unemployment. There are some significant differences however between the political contexts and resulting emphases in Britain and Australia.
2. Queensland does not have external exams. A mysterious alchemy converts students' results on a statewide, standardised 'core skills' test combined with school results into a ranked 'Overall Position' (OP). VHA stands for 'Very High Achievement' - the highest level achievable for school subjects.
3. One member of the AVC Steering Committee estimated that 500,000 hours of workplace training would be required if just 40 schools attempted to replicate this pilot.

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